



Historical Cannon Recovered for Public Display

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Nearly 10 years ago, while snorkeling off Key Largo, volunteers in the Sanctuary's Submerged Resource Inventory (SRI) program came across a set of 13 iron cannons that may date to the eighteenth century when gun sloops from Britain's Royal Navy patrolled the waters of the Keys. When a ship grounded on the coral reef, it was customary for its crew to jettison heavy objects such as cannons in order to float the ship off. If successful, the cargo and ship were saved, and the crew could possibly return at a later time to salvage the cannons.

The circumstances that led to the 13 cannons being deposited on the seafloor are not known. A more thorough investigation of the site uncovered an anchor and several items of mostly hardware, suggesting that the ship was demasted, a fact that lends credence to the idea that the crew jettisoned these items to lighten their grounded ship.



Abe Lopez (left) is overseeing the conservation of the cannon at the Mel Fisher Museum. Lawrence Campbell (right) will be building cannon's gun carriage.
(Photo: Denis Trelewicz)



Upper Keys Regional Manager LCDR Dave Score (left) and local maritime historian Denis Trelewicz (right) prepare the cannon for lifting.
Photo: Brenda Altmeier

Denis Trelewicz, local maritime historian and Vice President of the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys, was one of the SRI volunteers who came upon and documented the site in 1993, which is now known as the "Bunn Cannon Patch."

According to Trelewicz, "information that is engraved and embossed on the cannon may be useful in tracing where the gun was produced and to which ship it was issued. This information could help establish the name of the ship and the circumstances surrounding the incident. If the ship's identity can be determined, a gap in maritime history of the upper Keys will be filled."

Based on archival research conducted by Trelewicz and historians in England, Trelewicz believes that the cannons may have been on a British warship, dating back to a time when Florida belonged to Great Britain, between 1763 and 1783.

The historical value is the primary reason Trelewicz applied to the Sanctuary for a permit to remove one of the cannons, conserve it for future generations, study the information embossed and engraved on it, and eventually mount it for public display. After a careful consideration of the request and review by state and federal archaeologists, the Sanctuary granted permission to remove and conserve the cannon.

Trelewicz generously agreed to fund the conservation process, which will take almost two years and is being carried out by Conservator Abe Lopez in the conservation lab at the Mel Fisher Museum in Key West. Trelewicz is also providing funds for the gun carriage that will be built to hold the cannon after conservation. Lawrence Campbell, a member of the Historic Maritime Education Foundation, has graciously offered to design and build the gun carriage. When completed, plans call for the cannon to be on display for the public at the Key Largo Chamber of Commerce.



Denis Trelewicz examines the cannon being conserved at the Mel Fisher Museum in Key West.
Photo: Larry Campbell

*Note: This article appeared in the Spring/Summer 2004 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: floridakeys.noaa.gov.*